The Account by a Gentleman from Elvas

Translated and Edited by James Alexander Robertson
With Footnotes and Updates to Robertson's Notes by John H. Hann

The True Relation of the Hardships Suffered by Governor Hernando de Soto, by a Gentleman of Elvas, was translated from the Portuguese by James Alexander Robertson for the Florida State Historical Society and was published in two volumes for them by the Yale University Press as the society's publication number eleven. The first volume, published in 1932, was a photographic facsimile of the original Portuguese edition of Elvas in 1557. The second volume, published in 1933, was an English translation of volume one by Dr. Robertson, who was at that time the executive secretary of the Florida State Historical Society.

The Robertson translation has stood the test of over fifty years and is still considered to be an excellent translation. Relevant portions of the front material from volume one have been included here to clarify the context of Robertson's work. This is followed by the complete translation from volume two of the Robertson edition, which is reproduced below, followed by Dr. Robertson's notes.

In Robertson's notes, native towns and physical features are located according to a route reconstruction on modern maps by Theodore H. Lewis, published in the volume *Spanish Explorers in the Southern United States, 1528–1543* (1907). The decision to rely on Lewis was a rather eclectic one, because Lewis's reconstructions, though interesting, deviated widely from those of nearly all of his predecessors and contemporaries, leading John R. Swanton to call him the "great iconoclast" of De Soto route studies. No effort has been made in the present volume to update these locations, although the reader should be aware that in many, if not most, cases a better estimate might be had. Modern versions of De Soto's route, although they differ from each other, generally make use of ethnographic, linguistic, and archaeological data that were not available to Lewis. References to these more recent attempts may be found in our bibliography.

The notes in turn have been updated for this edition by Dr. John Hann, historic sites specialist for the state of Florida, the Bureau of Archaeological Research, under a grant from the Institute for Early Contact Period Studies at the University of Florida in Gainesville.

Foreword

[To Robertson volume one]

This facsimile reproduction of the narrative of the expedition by Hernando de Soto into Florida and regions to the north and west thereof was made from the copy of the original "Relaçam" of 1557 owned by the New York Public Library. This work is so rare that but two other copies [those of the Bibliotheca de Ajuda, in Portugal, and of the British Museum] are known to be in existence. The publication, therefore, of a source so important for the history of the United States can be regarded only as an epochal event. A new translation into English of the original, with copious annotations, has been made by James Alexander Robertson, executive secretary of the Society. . . . The Committee thanks the New York Public Library for its courtesy in allowing its priceless volume to be photographed for reproduction; and the Yale University Press for the care with which it has executed the work.

John B. Stetson, Jr.,
Chairman,
F. Franklin Jameson,
Charles B. Reynolds,
George Parker Winship.
Committee on Publications.

Preface

[To Robertson volume one]

The excuse for a new edition of the "Relaçam Verdadeira" of the "Fidalgo" of Elvas is many fold: the rarity of the original; its intrinsic merit; its importance for the early history of lands now a part of the United States; the greater exactness of the translation. This narrative forms, indeed, one of the most valuable of the existing sources whereby the veil was lifted, at least momentarily, from the darkness enshrouding the life of a great part of the lands bordering upon the northern shore of the Gulf of Mexico and the lands reaching north and northeast of that mighty inland water. The Florida of that early day, and for long after, covered an indefinite extent of territory. The name conveyed only a vague impression of vast space delimited perhaps at the west by the Las Palmas River, but extending northward no person knew whither. On that account, not only is this narrative of interest to the present State of Florida, but as well to Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, North Carolina, [South Carolina], and Tennessee, and beyond the Father of Waters to Louisiana, Arkansas, Texas, and even other regions. One narrative only of the interior of the present United States is older than it—the account of that traveler of travelers, Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, whose adventures, unique among such annals, as truly as those of Hernando de Soto, form an epic of the New World.

The brief glimpse afforded by the narrative of the expedition of Hernando de Soto of an aboriginal population struggling painfully along the pathway toward civilization, exhibiting many of the characteristics of older known peoples, together with many of the virtues and the frailties of the barbarian—unaware of the civilization of the Old World and of the white man—was not to be renewed, except momentarily, until almost a score of years later when Tristán de Luna y Arellano thrust himself up through Florida and Alabama on his abortive expedition. So vivid was the tale of the unknown Portuguese and so avid his audience "new things for to hear" that his book must have been literally read to pieces, for but three known copies of it are known to have survived to the present day. Even so early after its

publication as 1609, when that puissant man of letters, Richard Hakluyt, the father of English colonization, made the first translation of it into English, he seems to have been hard put to it to find a copy. The successive reissues of Hakluyt's translation; the new translation of the original into French and the translation of the latter into English near the end of the seventeenth century; the new translation from the Portuguese into English by Buckingham Smith and the latter reissues of this by Edward Gaylord Bourne and Theodore H. Lewis; and the reprint of the original Portuguese, albeit modernized in 1844; all these attest the abiding interest in, and the value of, the narrative.

As one of the basic documents of the early history of Florida, it appeared peculiarly fitting that the "Relaçam Verdadeira" should form one of the publications of the Florida State Historical Society. It was therefore planned, shortly after the foundation of the society, to publish it, not only in an English dress, but in its original form as well. This has now been done. The work is issued in two volumes, the first being the reproduction of the original and the second the translation. At first it was intended to reissue the translation by Buckingham Smith, but closer examination of this with the original proved the desirability of making a new and more exact translation. In performing this task, the work of the present writer was made much easier by virtue of the two preceding translations into English from the original Portuguese and the translation into French noted above. To these, especially to the translations by Richard Hakluyt and Buckingham Smith, of which the translator made continual use, his indebtedness is acknowledged.

In annotating the translation, constant reference was made to the translations of the narratives by Luis Fernández de Biedma and Rodrigo Rangel which appear in the second volume of Edward Gaylord Bourne's "Narratives of the Career of Hernando de Soto." The first was reprinted by Professor Bourne from the volume of Buckingham Smith; the second he translated himself from the narrative as incorporated in the great work of Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo Valdez. Numerous citations have been made of each account, in each instance the fitting acknowledgment being rendered. It was thus possible to make some comparison of the incidents as related by the three chroniclers. A much less extensive use was made of the narrative by the Inca Garcilaso de la Vega, both for lack of space and because his account is the least dependable of the four narratives. Considerable use was made also of the footnotes of Theodore A. Lewis published in his edition of Buckingham Smith's translation of the "Relaçam Verdadeira," due acknowledgment being made for each citation. . . .

J. A. R. November, 1932

True Relation of the Hardships Suffered by Governor Hernando De Soto & Certain Portuguese Gentlemen During the Discovery of the Province of Florida. Now newly set forth by a Gentleman of Elvas.

¶Translated and Edited by James Alexander Robertson.

¶Volume Two. Translation and Annotations.

¶DeLand, The Florida State Historical Society, 1933.

[Title page to Robertson volume two]

Preface

[to Robertson volume two]

. . . Hernando de Soto seems to have been especially fortunate in most of the men who joined his expedition. They were recruited under his vigilant eye; and the enthusiasm with which they flocked to his standard is evidenced by the fact that many were left behind for lack of room in the vessels sailing to Cuba from San Lúcar; or because they were rejected as unfit. From all who offered themselves, he chose those whom he considered best fitted for the arduous undertaking that lay before them.

Some had campaigned with him in Peru. They were an asset, for they had been tried and had stood the test. They knew the hardships and uncertainties of a campaign in the wilderness. A considerable number were from De Soto's own town or province, and either they, or their families, were probably known by him. That Portuguese should join the expedition is not at all strange. Badajoz, a chief city of the then province of Extremadura, lay near the Portuguese town of Elvas. To this very day, each place is an active smuggling center. Each is a place of entry or departure into or from the other country. There is, and probably always has been, a constant passing from one place to the other. Still, the precaution seems to have been taken of enrolling the men who came from Elvas as being of the town of Badajoz—this undoubtedly to satisfy any official inquiry that might be made.

Some members of the expedition were of comparatively high rank—perhaps higher even than that of the commander. As such, they had behind them the power and prestige of family, and some, of wealth; and all had apparently been bred to the profession of arms. It is not strange to find some of them among the officers of the expedition. Lay priests and friars were also enrolled, one of whom had the name Soto, evidently a kinsman of the leader. Their primary function seems to have been the spiritual care of the men of the expedition, but their number would indicate that they were intended as well for the evangelization of the Indians whenever occasion might offer. Though the chroniclers do not so state specifically, the raising of a huge

cross on a high hill overlooking an Indian village, as related by the "Fidalgo" of Elvas, was probably suggested by the ecclesiastics. For the rest, they probably fought side by side with and suffered equally with the other members of the expedition. After the reverses at Mavilla and Chicaça, they were reduced to saying "dry masses" because of the loss of the wheaten hosts by fire, together with all the sacred ornaments; and it was not considered proper to use hosts made from maize flour.

There were apparently no convicts among the men. So ready were men to enlist in an expedition led by one who had played so prominent a part in the brilliant Peruvian campaign—De Soto was next to Francisco and Hernando Pizarro, and in moral worth far above them—that it was not necessary to open the doors of the jails in order to get enough men. Some of the men were of coarser mold than others and many were reckless and ruthless enough. There was exploitation of the Indians, and cruelty and lust were not absent. This, indeed, has been the story of the contact between white and red man from the beginning to the present day, and no colonizing nation and no country in the Americas can boast of a clean escutcheon. De Soto's expedition, however, in comparison with some that preceded it and many that followed it, was of a superior tone. Much of the credit for this belongs to the leader himself. It can at least be said of him that he was not heedlessly cruel. He was impelled by the necessity for self-preservation. One may readily grant that to our present twentieth-century eyes the basic idea of the expedition was ethically wrong, but this conception was not that of the age of conquest in the Americas.

One and all, from the greatest to the least, were able to endure hardship and suffering. Even in times of plenty, they were dogged by the grim specter of hunger. A proof of De Soto's ability as a leader is the absence of any attempt to mutiny; though there were signs of unrest among the men at the time of his death. Luis de Moscoso was not at all to be classed as a leader with De Soto; and it is evident that the idea of self-preservation held the expedition together under him. It is quite probable that a mutiny, if led by such men as Baltasar de Gallegos or Juan de Añasco, would have succeeded. It is to the credit of them all that the expedition ended as a unit.

De Soto was fortunate also in his officers, who were, in most instances, of more than ordinary ability. The devotion he inspired among his men is evidenced by the determination of Nuño de Tobar, who had been "maese de campo" and whom De Soto had deposed, to follow him to Florida as a private in the ranks. He ever gave unwavering loyalty to his leader. One altercation De Soto seems to have had with Tobar's successor, Vasco Porcallo

de Figueroa, who returned to Cuba shortly after the expedition had reached Florida; but Porcallo seems to have borne him no enmity and aided the expedition from Cuba on more than one occasion.

As compared with the expedition of Pánfilo de Narvaez and that of Tristán de Luna y Arellano, and even that of Francisco Vasquez de Coronado, the personnel of the De Soto expedition was unquestionably of a higher type and was better kept in hand. There is one instance only when the men of the Narvaez expedition approached those of De Soto—that is, when they built their crazy boats near the present St. Marks, and perished almost to a man on their attempt to reach Mexico. The exploits of Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca form an epic of their own quite apart from [those of] Narvaez.

The records of the expedition show the conquering Spaniards at their best. It was no slight undertaking to plunge into a new land, of which all were ignorant. Not knowing what was to be encountered from red man, wild beasts, the terrain itself, and the forces of nature, the expedition was as venturesome an undertaking as was that of Admiral Byrd and his men to Antarctica—perhaps more so, for notwithstanding De Soto's careful planning (much more careful than was usual at that epoch), he had little aid from science and all his apparatus was crude and clumsy as compared to that of the present day. But, as in all great undertakings, the men, we are told, longed for the hour of departure and thought they would never get to the fabulously rich land of Florida. Lured on by their love of adventure and the hope of achieving great wealth, they expected to find another Mexico or another Peru and their imaginations ran riot with the glories they were to achieve.

Never were men more grievously fooled. There was no wealth as they understood the term. They could not see the Florida of today. They could not visualize wealth as the result of the patient exploitation of nature. They had chosen for themselves four years of grueling hardship and suffering which, while they might "yield a pleasant tale to tell," were hard enough to bear. The survivors returned "sans everything."

On the other hand, many days of the expedition must have been extremely pleasant. There were many fine marches along the Indian trails which led beside pleasing streams or the shores of lovely lakes and through more or less open forests. Sometimes they hunted and fished and played with friendly Indians and had plentiful living. They frequently suffered unnecessarily because they were untrained to woodcraft. The problem of a sufficient food supply was among their greatest and most continual worries. They were not of the kind to establish a base where they might grow their

own food. They counted on getting most of this from the Indians, unmindful of the depredations they caused and the hostility they created for themselves. To build an enduring settlement was not to their taste. They were adventurers, and little else beside. If they could find another Peru, where settlements already existed, then they might settle down to a steady existence. They did not see even with the eyes of poor Tristán de Luna y Arellano, and they would have laughed to scorn the plans of that great colonial pioneer, Pedro Menéndez de Avilés.

They found no submission in the Indians as had been found in Peru or Mexico, where the Indians had long been disciplined into a partially sedentary life. Instead, they found that the plenty of today might turn to leanness tomorrow. The Indians were not to be coerced into obedience. Imprisoned or chained or mutilated they might be, but these things did not tame them nor calm the fury roused in them by the white strangers. Sometimes they killed their captors. Mavilla and Chicaça became grim reminders of what might be the common fate.

Gradually his men diminished in number—victims of disease, casualties, or sudden death from the Indians. Of the six hundred with which De Soto set out, three hundred and eleven only won through to Pánuco. The dwindling of his men and the loss of almost all his resources at last tempered the obstinacy of Hernando de Soto, and when sickness and death overtook him, near the shores of the "Great River" which he first of all white men is known to have crossed, he was intent on returning to Cuba, there to refit his expedition and set out once more on his quest of glory.

The death of the commander brought a new problem—how to get out of Florida and return to as much civilization as Cuba or Mexico had to offer. Moscoso, the leader appointed by De Soto while on his deathbed, was not the man De Soto had been. It would appear that Baltasar de Gallegos was more fitted for the leadership than was Moscoso, who, said the "Fidalgo" of Elvas, was fond of a gay life and of taking his ease. Still, however chaotic grew conditions, the expedition did not lose its heroic quality. The aimless marching and countermarching, without knowing directions, often through pathless forests and wildernesses, without reliable guide or interpreter, harassed by hostile Indians only too anxious to be rid of them, was no small thing. Quite lost at last, it is no wonder that the majority of them counseled a return to the "Great River" where they might build boats and pass out into whatever body of water it flowed into and so reach a land inhabited by Christians. The return was no easy thing in itself, for they passed through a land that had once learned to hate them. Not a little heroic was the building

of the vessels near the banks of the Mississippi and their sailing down the mighty stream to the gulf, harassed on their way by the Indians who came at them from all directions like angry hornets. Not the least wonder was their safe arrival at Pánuco after suffering various storms in the Gulf of Mexico.

Even in that frontier town, the survivors must have presented a curious and semi-ludicrous spectacle, clad as they were in skins and bark garments with which they had replaced the clothing lost at Mavilla and Chicaça. No shipwrecked mariners were probably more thankful at rescue than were they. Their reception at Pánuco was characteristic of the frontier. They were welcomed wholeheartedly and given freely of the best that could be had. Some of them found acquaintances or people from the same towns in Spain as themselves. The same hospitality was shown them all the way to Mexico City.

So ended the expedition. Some, we are told, looked back with regret at the land of Florida and in later years more than one tried to get permission to return thither. The results of the expedition are more interesting to the present age than to its own. It established for one thing the immensity of the northern American continent; as well as the difficulty of passing through its forests and over its rivers and lakes, and its impassable swamps and the cold regions in the northern interior. It also established, jointly with the Coronado expedition of 1540–1542, the absence of great centers of barbaric or semi-civilized splendor such as had been found in Mexico and Peru. The northern continent, therefore, lost much of its interest, until the rivalry of other European nations once more focused Spain's attention on these inhospitable regions and caused the sending out of other expeditions for settlement and colonization lest its rich colonies to the southward be lost by attack from the north.

J. A. R.
[January, 1933]

Contents

TRUE RELATION OF THE HARDSHIPS SUFFERED BY GOVERNOR DON HERNANDO DE SOTO AND CERTAIN PORTUGUESE GENTLEMEN DURING THE DISCOVERY OF FLORIDA.
[Translation]

True Relation of the Hardships Suffered by Governor Don Hernando de Soto and certain Portuguese Gentlemen in the Discovery of the Province of Florida. Now newly set forth by a Gentleman of Elvas.

Examined by the Inquisitor

Fernando da Silveira,[1]
Senhor das Serzedas, great poet
and very illustrious, respecting
the material of this Book,
in praise of its
Author.

EPIGRAM

He who would see the New World,
The Golden Pole, according to
Other seas, other lands,
Achievements great, & wars;
And attempt such things
As amaze and give pleasure,
Strike terror and give delight:
Read by this author
This pleasing narrative;
And he will see not a fabulous [history]
[But one] worthy of being esteemed,
Made use of, read, and discussed.

Finis.

André de Burgos to the prudent reader.

Aristotle says that all or the most of men are always prone and inclined to see and hear new things, especially when those things pertain to very distant and remote countries. Those things, he says, furnish diversion to delicate and subtile minds, and re-animate dull minds; and this gives them a natural desire to see and to hear, and, if possible, to take part in them.* This desire is for two reasons greater among the Lusitanians than among other nations: the first, because they are a warlike people and of very subtile minds; the second, because they are by nature great navigators, and have discovered more land, with wider sailing, than all the other nations of the world. And as it appeared to me that I do some little service to those who might read this book, I resolved to publish it, taking courage inasmuch as it was written by a Portuguese and in his own language; and likewise because Portuguese citizens of the city of Elvas aided in the discovery, as the narrative itself makes mention.† I believe beyond doubt that he has written truthfully, and that he has not recounted fables or fictitious things; for one must believe that the author, not having any interest in so doing, would not swerve from the truth. Besides this, he asserts that all that is here written passed before him. Should the language, by chance, not appear to you very polished, lay not the fault on me, for I did not write it but only published it. May God have you in His keeping.

In these footnotes and in my updates of Robertson's notes (found at the end of the Elvas account), where sixteenth-century Portuguese spelling differed from modern spelling, I have used the modern spelling so that an interested reader may find the words in a modern Portuguese dictionary.—JH

*In the Portuguese text, the words for "if possible" (*se possível fôsse*) are placed within parentheses and include a verb, which Robertson deleted along with the parentheses. A strictly literal rendering of the Portuguese would be "if it should be possible."

†In the Portuguese text, the words for "as the narrative itself makes mention" were enclosed in parentheses.

Relation of what the adelantado of Florida, Don Hernando de Soto, suffered in conquering it: in which is set forth who he was, and some of those who went with him; some of the peculiarities and diversities of the country, and all they saw therein; and of what befell them.

[The Discovery of Florida]